

## Tucson Citizen

# Guest opinion: Stuck in '50s, transit policy needs overhaul

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Transportation in America was once an engine of progress and an inspiration. Railroads opened the West, and automobiles brought mobility for a footloose nation after World War II.

Nowadays, getting around is a source of more problems than solutions. Traffic delays waste an average of 38 hours a year for urban commuters - almost an entire work week and more than twice as much as in 1985.

The major source of our addiction to expensive foreign oil, transportation consumes two out of every three barrels and is the fastest-growing source of global warming pollution.

The \$130-plus cost per barrel of oil and our crumbling infrastructure are drags on the economy.

And the once-flush federal transportation trust fund, like many of its state counterparts, is expected to run out of money in the next two years.

Since fulfilling President Eisenhower's 1956 vision of an interstate system to link our major cities, national transportation policy has stumbled on without a clear purpose.

Federal transportation spending has become little more than a giant public works program.

To keep our nation moving efficiently, the federal government must ensure dedicated funding and hold states accountable for roadway upkeep.

The responsibility today is left almost entirely up to states, where it competes for scarce dollars with popular programs and typically loses out to expensive projects that offer big headlines and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Federal transportation funds also continue to be distributed through the false assumption that more is better when it comes to roadways.

States receive highway funds based on three outdated criteria: the previous year's gasoline consumption, lane-miles of federal highways and the previous year's vehicle miles traveled.

So more driving garners more federal dollars. States that do their part to reduce America's oil dependence and global warming would lose out on federal dollars.

The federal government should reward states and localities that reduce gas consumption and miles driven by emphasizing public transportation.

Light rail, rapid bus transit, commuter rail, high-speed intercity rail and other forms of public transit are energy efficient and encourage development patterns that require less driving.

A recent report by the Arizona PIRG Education Fund shows that public transit saved 3.4 billion gallons of oil in 2006 - saving \$9 billion at the pump and preventing 26 million tons of emissions.

Public transit trips have been growing more quickly than auto miles or population since 1995.

Likewise, 53 percent of Americans tell pollsters they would take more public transportation if it were available near where they live and work.

Giving people the transportation choices they want will require Congress to make changes.

Since 1956, federal, state and local governments have spent nine times more on highway subsidies than on public transportation. This ratio has improved, but not fast enough.

President Bush's proposed 2009 budget would take us back in time, cutting federal transit money by \$200 million, slashing Amtrak's budget by 40 percent, and diverting \$3.2 billion from the federal transit account to highways. Such cuts would move the country in exactly the wrong direction.

Congress will have a golden opportunity when the transportation authorization bill expires next year.

Public leaders must recognize that our transportation problems stem from a lack of purpose. They must rewrite policy to address our rapidly aging infrastructure, urban congestion, oil dependence and an overheating planet.

Instead of simply "reauthorizing" the transportation act with higher spending levels, Congress must reinvent how it funds transportation.

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